JOAN AND THE BABIES AND I

COSMO HAMILTON

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JOAN AND THE BABIES AND I

By Cosmo Hamilton

THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

THE DOOR THAT HAS NO KEY

THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

A PLEA FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION

JOAN AND THE BABIES AND I

We had met and loved and the earth was ours.
FRONTISPIECE. *See page* 86.

JOAN AND THE BABIES AND I

BEING CERTAIN CHAPTERS FROM
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN MAINWARING
THE NOVELIST

BY

COSMO HAMILTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARY LANE McMILLAN

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JOAN AND THE BABIES AND I

I

A STURDY little shadow rested suddenly on the pages of my book.

"Hullo, man."

I looked up. It was a boy.

"Hullo, man," I answered.

He shook his well-shaped head and a look of resentment came into his large, brown, intelligent eyes.

"I be's a boy," he stated, with extreme decision.

"O, I beg your pardon. And what do they call you?"

"John."

"Jack for short?"

"Mudder does."

I held out my hand. The sun fell hotly on my palm. "How de do, John?" I should have been glad of the privilege of calling him Jack, too.

He gave me a very brown, small hand. "Your nose is coming off," he said, cordially.

"Yes, the sun's splendid, isn't it? My chin's coming off too. It's like being punished for being naughty to shave every morning."

"Do you shave your nose?" He touched it in a gingerly but interested way with a forefinger.

"Not yet," and I rapped a piece of wood three times. "Won't you sit

down?" I made room for him on the flat piece of brown rock in the hollows of which the receding sea had left warm reminders.

John glanced behind me where, beyond a bank of sand and rock and undergrowth, he could just see the roof of a lonely verandahed cottage, and in front, where a blue-green sparkling sea was playing with the golden sand. He had begun to build a great fort with moat and drawbridge and the flag of the United States, in the shape of a piece of floppy seaweed, flying proudly in the soft warm breeze. It was a hundred yards away and a little round, golden head was bending over it. I could see two small brown legs and the blue of a short frock.

My pipe, which had got out the wrong side of the bed that morning and had been gummy and disagreeable ever since, refused to draw. It detested sarcasm, and like a fool I had forgotten that. I had to fall back on a cigarette and took out a rather nice silver case.

It caught John's miss-nothing eye. "When that be's empty I have it," he said, and metaphorically placed it among his collection of treasures.

I didn't see it there. I pointed to brown legs. "Who's that?"

"Marjory."

"Does she belong to you?"

He looked puzzled and shook his head. "She's Mudder's," he said, dismissing the subject. "You live in this place?"

"No. I'm staying at the hotel over there." I pointed to the roof that cut the sky-line rather nicely half a mile away, with a long stretch of yellow sand, a white bridge and a white road, garden bordered, lying in between.

"You like it there?"

"It does," I said, thinking with amusement and a touch of bewilderment of the large collection of little dishes with which a white frocked, roguish-eyed waitress immediately built me round the moment I sat down to a meal. Also of the tinny piano in the bleak ball-room out of whose martyred keys dozens of inexpert young fingers continually tortured nerve-racking sounds.

"I have a house," said John. "You have no house?"

I pointed to the horizon with a geographically inaccurate finger. "Yes, three thousand miles over that line," I answered, "and then fifty more."

"Is anyone there now?"

"Yes, a housekeeper and a big dog and a lot of books. All the same it's so empty that I couldn't stand it. That's why I'm here. Who lives in your house?"

"Me and Mudder and Marjory and Nannie and Rose and Robert and Alice."

"Do they belong to Mudder, too?"

He shot out a shrill scream of laughter. "No; Alice is mine and Robert's Marjory's."

It was my turn to be puzzled.

"They're bunnies," he said.

For some absurd and unexplainable

reason I felt relieved. And then a little sweet voice came to us calling "John!" and again and again "John!" — the last time with a suggestion of tears.

But as John took no notice, being extremely interested in the clocks of my socks, I called out, "Here's John," and waved my hand.

"What be's those things?"

"Clocks."

"Do they tell the time?"

"No; they only tell the character. If they're plain and ordinary like mine you may speak to the man who wears them, but if they're dinky and queer you mustn't touch him with the end of a barge pole. . . . Hullo, Marjory."

The golden head and brown legs and short blue frock were in arm's length of

me. Also big, wide-apart eyes, a little unformed nose, a beautifully shaped mouth and two charming tanned hands with a little ring on one finger.

"This is a Man," said John.

"Thank you, John," I said. I had never had such a splendid introduction before. "How de do, Marjory."

"I sit by you, too," she said, and put one hand on my knee.

A funny hot feeling, like pain threaded in a sharp needle, ran through me. If I had these two little good bits of responsibility in my life I might still have been in that empty house three thousand miles away across that line, and then fifty more.

John made a long arm across me and pushed the little hand away. "You

mustn't do that," he said. "He be's mine."

Brown legs looked into my face, at first doubtfully, then a slow smile turned up the corners of her mouth and two rows of tiny white teeth came. She put her hand back again and took me into her set. "You're Margy's man, too," she said.

It was a proud moment for me. But I was seized with a small panic. How to keep the friendship of both these new friends? I was a child among children. I knew that they blew watches and made a tunnel between one's legs and had whooping cough and took crackers when no one was looking and had a perfectly wonderful knack of finding places that left dirty marks on white clothes. So I hauled out my

watch quickly to divert what was going to become a very flattering fight for the possession of me. "Blow, old son," I said.

He did, and gurgled and laughed to see his success.

"Now me," said little brown legs.

And all was well.

They started to talk together, — John about a battleship that had appeared two or three days before, and Marjory about a little girl whose nurse had spanked her, but with such a rush of words that to this day the true story of that tragic event remains a mystery. And all the time the sun shone hotly on the three of us and the song of the sea came merrily to our ears and not a cloud even as big as a man's hand broke the wonderful blue of the sky. John had

run a hand through my arm and Marjory had put her cheek against my sleeve and a small pink foot on my leg. I was accepted.

And just as I had it in my mind to propose that I should be conducted over the fort and shown the great hall where the gallant pirate lived with his ruffians, a rather shrill Irish voice called "Babies — Babies."

"That's my Nannie," said Marjory, but she made no effort to move.

And John brought a great rusty hook out of his pocket, with three shells, a cutting of an engine from a magazine, an empty cotton reel, a bit of pencil, and a used tin of tooth paste. "Look!" he said proudly.

A very large, beamy shadow fell on

the sand in front of us. "Whall, I guess you're comfortable, annyway."

We all looked up. It was obviously Nannie, and it seemed to me that she needn't have been so broad and thick through or possess such tremendous girth to look after two such thoroughbred youngsters. She could have managed a younger son who had become a harmless lunatic with one of her fat spatulate hands, and kept a six-foot-two Connemara constable in order with half her ripe tongue.

"Do you want to take the children in now?" I asked.

"I do, sorr," she said. "I guess I must clean them up for their dinner."

"Lunch," corrected Marjory, who still made no effort to move.

"No," said John. "I don't want to."

He was clutched. "Ye know ye must come. It's late as it is. If Oi have anny troubil ye shan't go to the village this afternoon for the candies. Oi'll learn ye to say 'I don't want to' to me. Oi'm yer Nannie and ye must mind me."

She lifted him up as though he were a small cushion. All his articles of virtu fell and he set up a big howl.

But Marjory still made no effort to move.

"Now come along, Marjory. Ye mother couldn't see you from the house and was frightened to death in case ye'd got drownded."

"I'm awfully sorry," I said. But I

couldn't be heard because John was giving an exact imitation of a jackal in acute agony and of a man on the treadmill. It was very disturbing.

He was clutched again. "Look at the gentleman. He's ashamed of ye. Such a cry-baby as ye are thin."

"I won't be a cry-baby." The noise ceased at once. John stood looking at me with his mouth drawn down and his eyes stretched, and tears streaming down his face.

Nannie seized her opportunity and a hand of both children and drew them up through the slipping sand, talking hard.

I got up and watched them. They kept looking round and waving and calling "Good-bye, Man." And when

they had been half pushed and half drawn up to the cottage I saw someone in white come out eagerly and quickly and bend down and draw both my new friends into her arms. The sun dodged the roof of the verandah and laid a caressing hand on a small golden head.

They waved again before going in, and for what seemed a long time I stood looking through the wall of the cottage and through the dead years, with regret like a great load in a home-sick heart. I turned away. I could see by the shortness of my shadow that I also must hurry to lunch or I should have to go without. And there at my feet lay a collection of some of the most valuable things in the world.

I made a hole in the sand and buried

them, marking the spot carefully. As I started to go I thought I saw the golden head move quickly from an upper window. I suppose it was because I hoped I should.

II

TO be at a loose end; to feel, in the middle of life, that you are drifting, with a dragging anchor, from old moorings; to realise suddenly that, although you can call on many friends and rely upon their coming, you are utterly unable to bring to you the one human being who can give life a meaning and a reason and a purpose; to go through crowded cities and quiet country lanes always alone even if you are listening to the laughter and talk of brothers and the men you like; to wake up in the middle of the night with a

sense of homesickness so strong and urgent, a longing and a desire for wife and children and home so terrible and poignant that ugly thoughts form themselves into menacing shapes and lurk in the corners of your room; to feel that you are working for no one particular person who will take pride in your success, have patience with your failure and give you God-sent sympathy and encouragement in your efforts to do better; and then to wander out aimlessly in search of the someone that you need, bitterly persuaded that you have missed her in the crowd, — these things are not good for a man. I knew, because I was going through all this. I had brothers who were married and whose homes echoed with children's

footsteps that I envied. I had an unmarried brother whose loyalty and unquenchable friendship were things to be proud of; but he, much younger, had his own vital and vivid interests and his way to make. Father and mother, — dead.

I had come to America to widen my interests, to divert my attention from myself, knowing that self-analysis led either to martyrdom or mental malady. I had seized on New York as a chemist on a new gas, or a bug hunter on a new species of beetle. I had examined it closely, been amused and interested at its rush and glitter and gone to the Massachusetts coast with only one idea, — to fill my lungs with air that was clean and my eyes and brain with the

sight and sense of nature in all its simple pride of life and movement and genuineness.

I had chosen the south coast instinctively, first having explored Boston and seen in it curious reminiscent bits of Cheltenham and London and some of the towns along the Thames. For several days I had been in the holiday-making hotel, alone among a throng of young people whose fathers and mothers talked and rocked on the verandah or played golf on a pretty course that overlooked the sea. The place was good. I liked it all the better because it reminded me of the Emerald Coast of Brittany, and I bathed in sea and sun with relish and refreshment. But the incessant spirit of search and wander

that dogged my heels had caught up with me again that morning and had linked arms as I had gone out to try and outdistance it, and to concentrate my thoughts on all the work that I had to do. The old restlessness was in my veins again. No ship came over the horizon to throw out friendly signals. Work seemed to have lost its old power to enchain me, to give me the old satisfaction that goes with the act of creating. I had made up my mind to get up and go on, — it didn't much matter where, — when the little sturdy shadow fell on the blank pages of my manuscript book and the small clear voice said, "Hullo, man."

And as I went back to lunch I had an odd warm feeling that I should stay

to dinner and other lunches and dinners. I felt that I had left the uncomfortable jeering spirit that I so completely detested somewhere among the rocks and undergrowth, biting its nails. These two children had given me their blessed trust and liking. They had struck the human note. They were friends. They might have been mine.

I laughed at the thought of it, as I hurried through the dry sand with its queer yellow weeds, or marched across the smooth almost wet stuff, from which the sea had just receded, leaving the pattern of the soles of my shoes temporarily behind. I had met and liked other children and been trusted. I had dozens of little friends in various parts of the earth who ran to me when I

came. But somehow, for no apparent reason, these two, John and Marjory, seemed to, — yes, I used the word, — "need" me. I felt just *that*, unexplainable as it was then, stupid and absurd as it seemed in those budding hours, and metaphorically I let go my anchor, I decided to stay. I didn't remember to have felt so light shouldered, so unburdened, so curiously and newly awake to life and its interests and ties for God knows how long. I went back with a song in my heart as though I had got out of a long tunnel and the sun was on me again. It was very strange and good.

After lunch I collected my manuscript book and a pencil, — self-filling pens are bad servants and are likely to

turn a man into a cynic, — and took up a place on the verandah that was deserted because the sun was on it, and with a new feeling of energy went over the first few chapters of my new novel. I found them limp, aimless and tinctured with a peculiar bitterness that left a taste in my mouth like that of nasturtium seeds. I tore them out and dropped them in little pieces over the verandah into a small mountain of dead leaves. The writing of a long novel at the best of times is not much less wearing than picking a hole in a prison wall with a hair pin. You must feel convinced that your plot means something, your characters are alive and that you are going to paint a picture of a recognisable phase of life that will have some

sort of value to your readers, or you might as well go out and break stones. I liked my plot as I had worked it out in my head but I had libelled my characters. In an unconscious way I had treated them as the inevitable hotel gossip treats the other visitors. Instead of giving them characters I had taken them away. So, in the right spirit, I began all over again with "This is a man" ringing in my ears, and with the comfort of that little cheek against my arm.

Without moving or being aware of the passing of time I worked fast and well until the sun had left my spot and I had finished the first chapter. Then I got up, on better terms with myself and in consequence with the world, put

my work in the dispatch-box in my room and swung out of the hotel. Instinctively I went over the bridge towards the place where John and Marjory had found me. I felt that I must recover those treasures and hand them back to the boy. How could he go to sleep peacefully without bringing an outburst of shrill Irish from Nannie unless the precious, used tin of tooth paste that would certainly be of infinite use in case of shipwreck or a brush with the Indians were safely under his pillow with the old iron hook and the reel of cotton?

The tide had come in and was just turning. A fringe of weed and the strange flotsam of the sea was stretched in a long uneven line within a few inches of the sun-dried sand. The sun was

ready to set and lingered for a moment generously, all golden. There was that wonderful hush and softness everywhere that precedes the passing of the sky's king and even the sea, disrespectful and egotistical as it is, seemed to be going out on tip-toe. A fishing boat, with a patched sail bagged out flatly, went silently and smoothly home. Small birds, with long narrow beaks and thin legs, paddled in the water. My shadow moved grotesquely at right angles all across the sand. I ought to have been a giant.

There was no sign of the children on the beach or the verandah of the cottage. I could only see the ropes of a hammock moving to and fro regularly. Perhaps "Mudder" and Nannie had taken them

by trolley car down to the village, — or did it call itself a town? And Rose, who was obviously a sturdy, fat-cheeked cook-maid who sang to herself in the kitchen and conducted badinage with the tradesmen's men from the back door, was enjoying a siesta with the "Saturday Evening Post." If they had been my children they certainly would have been out. I was certain that they *were* out from the look of the children. They spoke well for "Mudder." And so with my brain working hard, at one moment on my next chapter, at another on my sudden decision to stay in that place and finish the book, I went on keeping a sharp eye for a sight of Jack and "Mudder" and little brown legs.

They were not near the place where they had found me in the morning. But I dug up the invaluable things that I had buried and spread them out between my pockets, to their keen annoyance. As I turned the bend where the rocks mounted higher I saw Nannie's brave figure sitting squarely on the undergrowth and the two children in a boat. I dodged among the rocks until I came level with their backs and then went as quietly as I could, got into the boat and put my hands on imaginary oars.

"Now," I said, "out we go to sea, to Robinson Crusoe's island. Hold fast. The sea's mountains high and the one who falls overboard is lost." I rowed hard against a strong current and a stiff northeaster.

John tumbled to the idea immediately. He jammed his hat down on his head and gripped the side of the boat with one hand and the seat with the other. "All right, Captain," he shouted loudly, so that his voice might reach me through the roar of the sea, and his face took on the set expression of an old seafaring man who realises the danger and the responsibility.

Marjory was also at once alive to the game. She slipped to the bottom of the boat, twirled one arm around a leg of John's and caught hold of the side of the boat with a tiny, delicate hand. "I the captain," she said. "You Bill."

If John had dared, he would have let go with one hand and hit Marjory. He was seriously upset at this hideously

feminine remark. "No," he roared. "He's captain. I Bill, and you Sam."

Holding that if she wasn't captain she wouldn't be anything, Marjory made to get up and step overboard to certain death. "Look out, Sam," I yelled. "Move one inch and I put a bullet through you."

She hunched one shoulder and cowered.

John nodded grimly, as who should say, "Serve the blighter right, too," and moved to and fro as if tossed by the great movement of the sea.

I pulled my heart out for a whole minute. "Land," I cried. "Sit tight, man. I believe we're saved. Bill, stand up and look for a safe landing."

He obeyed orders sharply, rocking as

he stood and putting a hand to his forehead to help him to peer through the blinding rain. "Yes, Captain, there!"

"Aye, aye," said I, and with a superhuman effort beached the almost waterlogged boat. "Would you believe it, mates?" I cried gleefully. "It's Robinson Crusoe's island. Tumble out, you two, there's work to be done before night comes."

Out sprang John. "I build a hut," he said.

"Right."

"And I sit in it," said Marjory, rising in a quite perfect Fifth Avenue manner.

John ignored her. "Give me the saw," he said.

I gave it to him. "That tree first."

He attacked it vigorously, pushing

Marjory away when she walked through it.

"Now, Sam, stand there and look out for lions and tigers while I make a fire. Do you see anything?"

"Yes, Nannie."

"That's not Nannie," scoffed John. "That's a porpoise."

And Marjory laughed.

I pulled an old piece of sacking, — or it may have been a shirt, — from the boat and put a match to it. Fool! The sight of the actual instantly destroyed the imaginative. John dropped his metaphorical saw and came to watch the flame, and Marjory left her lookout and ran forward. "Burn this, too," she cried and twisted off her straw hat.

The game was over.

I rescued the hat and saved a spanking for Brown-legs and sat down with my back against the boat. The west had become all red and gold and the sea was stained in great patches. The small, long-legged birds still paddled. I saw the faint thin half circle of a slim new moon lying on its back.

And while the light was fading I told my friends a story, sitting between them, holding two sticky hands. But just before I had finished it a clear sweet voice came to us calling "John — Marjory," and they both struggled eagerly to their feet and ran away from me without a word.

I sat on with my back to the boat till all the day had gone and the angel of night had lit the lamp in the moon, — wishing and wishing.

III

THE place continued to hold me. To my surprise and relief the spirit of search and wander had lost me or had gone off to punish some other lonely man whose life was empty. I was working again with enthusiasm. Three days slipped off the calendar almost before I realised that they had come. I got up early and wrote till breakfast, and after it till half past eleven. Then I went out and made castles in the sand for John and Marjory until Nannie gathered them in to lunch. In the afternoon I wrote again till five

o'clock and rejoined the babies for further games or stories. And at night, up in my bedroom, only luckily just in ear-shot of the tortured piano, I buried myself in the new book till long after everybody in the hotel was in bed and asleep, and my small room reeked of tobacco. It was intensely still and quiet at night except for the regular pulsing of an engine somewhere near.

I found myself continually wondering why it was that the sudden and unexpected advent of these two little beings, who were, after all, not much different from dozens of others whom I knew much better and to some of whom I was connected by ties of blood, should have dispelled my loneliness. Very vaguely and without any reason it

seemed to me that they were unconsciously only the signals of someone in distress, someone equally lonely and at a loose end; someone who had not found content or happiness or the glory of love. I had a feeling that I was waiting, that I was going to be called upon to accept a great responsibility, to assume a proprietorship of human life that was the thing most needed by me to make my own life good and big and real. It was all, at that time, phantom-like and untranslatable. I couldn't grasp it or pin it down. But I was curiously satisfied and soothed and quieted. I seemed to be like a man who had been thrown on what he supposed was a desert island and just at the time when his craving for human

intercourse has led him almost up to the moment when he ended an aimless and miserable life a bunch of flowers had been thrown into his cave with the scent of hope and a cry for help upon them.

My desire to see and meet the mother of John and Marjory grew stronger and stronger as the days went by. Several times I saw the slight sweet figure with the golden head bend over the children on the verandah, but never closer than that. The babies talked about "Mudder" continually. She was their heroine and always the mere sound of her voice sent them to their feet and away. There was no mention of the word father. To them as well as, oddly enough, to

me such a person had no existence. It was all very curious.

But I asked them no questions, put them through no cross-examination. I played with them and was well content to wait. In my room in the hotel there already seemed to be three bunches of flowers, and all the air was filled with the scent of hope and always I could feel as plainly as though I were a Marconi operator the call for help.

My God, who was readier than I to respond? Only the man who himself needs help can understand the urgency of such a call. In a sort of way I gathered all my strength together, stood watching and waiting all strung into an eager alertness, ready to go to the rescue at a moment's notice. In no

other way can I describe the peculiar feelings that pervaded me during those three golden days of work and play.

I shall never forget that fourth evening.

I worked rather later than usual, being vitally interested and absorbed in a close analysis of the character of a man who should have been great if he had not suffered from an incurable desire to be popular. I hurried across the sands in a fading light. I had made an appointment at the boat. I was more than an hour late. The children were not there, nor was there any sign of them. I went nearer to the house than I had ever been before. I could see no one. There was an engine standing on the rail of the verandah and a

white bear with one ear gone lying in a bush. Someone was singing in the kitchen.

I hunted about, hoping that I should come suddenly on two small crouching bodies and four large dancing eyes hiding from me. I slipped about among banks of dry sand and tangled undergrowth. But there were no babies. I was only half amused at the depth of my disappointment. Seeing no sign of the bulky figure of the nurse I told myself that they had all gone down to the village.

I had never been beyond the boat. I went that way then, a jumble of thoughts in my head, — work and the construction of it; what I should be teaching those two children if they had

been mine; whether I ought to send a cable to my agent in London giving him my address; whether if I had a son like John I should put him through drills and make him understand something of discipline. And all the while I was going from rock to rock like a goat and absorbing the exquisite softness of the colour of the sky that looked as though it had been done with pastels by a master hand. And I remember that I was urged on by a feeling of indescribable eagerness and exhilaration, like that which must pervade a tired man who stumbles his way towards home.

I rounded a sharp bend and stopped.

Within twenty yards of me I saw a girl with a golden head and a round white neck and a white frock and shoes,

There was an exquisite, a bewildering femininity all about her. *Page* 43.

sitting on a ledge. One arm was around Marjory, who lay out asleep with her cheek against a breast and her little brown knees all bare. John was lying across her lap with his fair head in the dip of it, his eyes fast shut.

The mother's profile was cut against the cloudless sky, and she was looking out and out into space, into to-morrow, and there was a little smile round her lips. There was an exquisite, a bewildering femininity all about her, like a halo, a sweet essence of motherliness, even in the lines and curves of her that were so young and lovely. There was a certain strength about her, too, in the thoroughbred cut of her nose and chin and the wideness of her blue eyes.

I stood there, holding my breath.

All my blood raced through me and my heart seemed to tumble. My search and my wanderings were over. I had arrived. I knew it so surely as I knew that the sun had almost set and that those children had held me for a reason in that place. She might have been my wife and the mother of my children.

I don't know how long it was before she turned her face round and saw me. But when she did there was an instant welcome in her eyes. No surprise, no embarrassment, nothing but a great warm, quiet welcome. I might have been her husband.

I went forward softly, my rubber shoes silent on the smooth brown, almost even, rock. "They're tired," I whispered.

And she nodded.

"I was to have met them at the boat, but I worked without watching the time."

"They waited and were very disappointed, so I took them for a scramble."

I sat down and Marjory opened her eyes for an instant, put a little hand on my arm and went to sleep again, sucking a finger.

Nothing more was said.

I watched the light fade slowly and saw the faint breeze fall away and heard the song of the sea rise up to greet the young moon. And an early star came out, not wholly alight yet, and peace and security touched my soul.

Presently John stretched and yawned and rubbed his fists into his eyes and

gathered himself up and put his arms tight round his mother's neck.

She laughed and said, "Look."

When he saw me he frowned a little and said after a pause: "Why don't you like me?"

I explained that I did and the reason why I hadn't been in time. Then he climbed over his mother, waking the little girl on his impetuous way, and kissed me.

It was good.

I carried Marjory home on my shoulder, holding John's hand, and we all talked together. On the step of the verandah I stopped short and lowered my little burden and delivered her up. Nannie came out and the babies were captured. John fell at the door, but didn't cry.

The mother and I stood face to face silently. She looked very white and slight.

I said, "Are you doing anything to-night after dinner?"

"No," she said.

"May I come to talk to you?"

"Yes."

I turned back three or four times on my way across the wet sand. I could see her standing on the verandah watching me go.

It seemed wrong and unnatural to be walking away from that house and that woman and those babies.

IV

LOOKING back, I can see myself racing up to my room, plunging into a cold bath with the tap running and changing into a dinner jacket. I can see my face looking as though a mask had fallen away from it and all my actions quick and energetic and gay. My mind, I remember, was like a child's. Something good had happened. I was unaccountably happy. I asked myself no questions. I looked no further than the moment, the hour. I had something delightful to do presently. The whole complexion of my life had changed.

I didn't, in my usual way, stop to analyse. I just seemed to be re-charged, revitalised, renewed. I revelled in a new sense of living and being alive. I felt extraordinarily young and unsophisticated.

I noticed that the dining-room was not so full that night. The season was drawing to a close and already many tables were empty, and some of the white-frocked waitresses had gone. I asked the one who made a pattern of small dishes on my table when the hotel closed, and she told me at the end of the first week of September — eight days. It didn't matter. I would find another place that would give me a bedroom. I could write anywhere, with my face to the sun and my book on

my knee. I needed no elaborate study lined with encyclopædias that I should never consult, elaborate reading lamps and a desk covered with brass pen trays and smart blotting pads cornered with silver. I had got over that phase, and had become a workman instead of a writer. A pencil, a block and sincerity, — that's all I needed for my job, with patience and a great economy of words.

I hurried through dinner and went out on the wide verandah and walked up and down, smoking a cigar. The early diners were sitting about in groups, rocking to and fro with the restlessness peculiar to Americans.

It was a wonderful night. The sky was cloudless and transparent and the

moon, like polished silver, lay a little shyly among a very orgy of stars. Half a dozen motor cars were drawn up on a wide space of gravel in front of the hotel, and the cigarettes of two of the chauffeurs made small blinking spots of light. In a cottage somewhere near a woman was singing in a high soprano, and away in the distance the irritating clang of a train's raucous bell was blown upon the soft breeze. There was a strong refreshing smell of the sea.

But it was impossible to keep to the hotel. I felt myself drawn towards the cottage where, by this time, John and Marjory were asleep with their fair heads dented into their pillows, and somewhere near, ready for the morning, the favourite book or toy of the moment.

So I went along the white road across which lights from the houses on each side were flung, and over the wooden bridge and down to the long stretch of sand. The laugh of a girl who was sitting with a man filtered into the air. The wash of the sea was ceaseless.

There was no one on the verandah of the cottage. I could see a light in the sitting-room through the screened door and windows. But just as I hesitated, wondering whether I had arrived too soon, the door opened and she came out. I might have called her.

She leant over and looked down on me, standing ankle deep in dry sand. "I've finished dinner," she said, answering my thoughts, and I went up, glancing into the hall sitting-room, as I

passed, with its uncovered wood walls and staircase and stone fireplace, with big screen in front. I arranged the cushions in the hammock and held it while she climbed into it. We might have known each other all our lives.

"Marjory has a little fever to-night," she said.

"Nothing serious?"

"Oh, no, a little overtired, perhaps. Children often get it, and their temperature runs up alarmingly. A little dose puts them right." She seemed to know that I had never possessed a child.

I sat on the ledge of the verandah and dropped my hat into a chair. The light from the sitting-room fell on her golden head and the white of her neck.

"Do they call you Jack or John?" she asked.

"How did you know that I'm a John?"

"I don't know. I just did. I knew when I saw you coming along the sands two days before you met the babies. I called the boy John because I knew that some day I should see you coming along the sands to speak to them."

A very warm feeling settled round my heart as though a precious hand had touched it and claimed it for ever. And for some time we sat quite quietly looking into each other's eyes, without self-consciousness or affectation, but with a sort of childlike gladness and trust and security.

"I wonder if you know my name," she said.

I knew the name by which I would have given all I possessed to call her. It was wife. "I've always called you 'Mudder' as the babies do."

"It's Joan. Do you like it? Is it right?"

"Perfectly right," I said.

I suppose it was odd that we didn't give each other our surnames. Somehow then they didn't matter, any more than such unnecessary things do to children. We had met. That was the whole thing that mattered to us both. I suppose it was odd that we didn't talk about ourselves any more, and go into details as to family and characteristics, — as we wished them to appear, — and describe the unhappiness that we had both gone through as people

describe the symptoms of illnesses. But somehow ego disappeared, or at any rate the expression of it. I didn't care who her people were, or where she had been born and educated, or where she had lived before I found her. Nor did she wish to know to whom I was related in England, whether I was Eton and Oxford, or whether my public school was unknown to polite society or my university the streets. I was hers, and she was mine, and that was all. We accepted each other. It was neither uncanny or psychic, nor anything with a far-fetched name that dictionaries have some difficulty in defining, or that people are fond of using indiscriminately about any rather exceptional or unconventional case. It was simply natural,

— at any rate to us. All we both felt was glad and secure and wholly trustful and beautifully, perhaps pathetically, childlike. Sooner or later we should be brought to the realization of the unavoidable fact that we were man and woman, with urgent desires, and the need to touch. Sooner or later we should be forced to face nature, who has no mercy, and makes no exceptions and ignores all rules and regulations with the most insolent triumph, and glories in her power.

But not then, not yet. Mutually and even unconsciously we seemed to agree at once to take the present into our arms and leave the future to look after itself. We were neither of us, so it seems to me as I look back, afraid of

whatever the future might have in store for us. The present was so good, so wonderful, so tremendous that we did not wish to recover from it; we wanted to spread it out. That, in itself, showed me, as plainly as it showed her, without words or explanations, that unhappiness and discontent and unfulfilment had dogged our heels.

And so for a long time we sat and chatted about the babies, and the place and the people and the colour of the sky when the sun set and a hundred and one impersonal things, with laughter.

Once I saw the two servants peer out through the screened window and dodge away when they saw me looking. I was not annoyed or surprised or made

self-conscious. Why shouldn't they peer? I was in my right place.

It was nearly midnight when she sat up and slipped suddenly out of the hammock. "As a rule I go to bed about half past nine," she said. "It must be eleven o'clock."

I told her the time and she held out her hand and said: "Good night. Bring your work here in the morning. Dictate to me or something. I want to help."

I picked up her absurdly small handkerchief and held the door open. She went in and locked it and waved her hand. I waited till she turned out the light and I heard her go upstairs, and then I went away, whistling like a boy.

The night watchman unbolted the

door of the hotel for me and we stood talking for a few minutes in the half-lit hall. He said that he slept perfectly well during the day and was quite used to lonely night work. I wondered what sort of stuff he was made of and envied him his stolid temperament, gave him a cigar and went upstairs to my empty room.

I didn't smoke and read in bed that night. I fell asleep almost as soon as my head touched the pillow and dreamed of Joan and the babies and home.

Where they were was home.

V

I WAS down to breakfast before anybody else was about. And as I ate my eggs with the sun pouring into the many windows of the long dining-room the waitress told me, having nothing else to do, that she was a school teacher somewhere near Boston who spent her holidays making a little money and getting sea air and bathing. She told me also that the three shock-headed bell boys were college men who did the same thing for the same purpose. This was new to me and surprising. I could only conceive having my shaving water

brought into my bedroom by an undergraduate of Oxford, or giving my shoes to be cleaned to a Cambridge man in the millennium. The snobbishness of the average Englishman would have received a nasty jar at the bare thought of an Oxford or Cambridge man doing anything useful. It appealed to me, although I don't profess not to be a snob in a hundred ways, as altogether admirable. How splendid for English parents if their immaculate and penniless sons refused to be parasites during the vacations and put their hands to honest labour for a change.

The waitress had discovered me as the author of several books that she had read and with a splendid frankness and a perfectly unhidden interest in me

made several drastic criticisms. But she certainly gave me a better half of grapefruit than usual.

I went out as quickly as I could get away and walked round to a shack where I had noticed that there were cut flowers for sale. I bought a large mixed bunch and with my book and pencil dashed off to the cottage.

I could hear the babies talking and walking above and Joan's clear sweet voice chiming in. But there was no one in the sitting-room. I went in quietly and opened a door that I imagined led to the kitchen. A round-faced, fresh-looking girl with dark hair and Irish eyes was doing something at the gas-stove.

I said, "Good morning, Rose. Will

you please give me a jug of water? I want to put these flowers on the breakfast table."

She looked at me with great round eyes and wide-open mouth for a long moment, then said, "I will," and did so. But it was with an amused-astonished air of "Well Oi'm jiggered!"

I put the flowers in the centre of the table. On my way out I saw, subconsciously, that the hat pegs were devoid of a man's hats. I took a chair into a place on the verandah where the sun came, read over my last chapter and fell to work.

Presently the two children, who had, I supposed, breakfasted in the nursery, ran out. They couldn't see me because I was behind the angle of the house and

so scurried off to the beach, big with ideas. A little later I saw Joan come down into the hall. She was singing and was all in white with a blue silk sweater. She drew up and looked searchingly at the flowers as though reading the message that I had asked them to deliver. Then she turned round, saw me, smiled, waved her hand and made a movement as though writing.

I waved mine and returned to work.

My pen was amazingly kinder and more human. The bitterness and satire had gone out of it. I found myself dealing with normal people in a normal way, — no longer of abnormal types, with cruelty.

When I looked up again Joan was sitting near by, with her back to the sun, busily cross-stitching.

John must have seen me from the beach because he came up out of breath shouting "Hullo, Man!" But Joan intercepted him deftly, held him tight and whispered: "Sssh, he's writing. Be a good boy and go to the boat. Mudder and Man will come down in a little while and have a fine game with you."

There was a little struggle and a shout and more whispering and then silence. I tilted my chair forward and looked over the verandah. Master John was walking slowly back with his chin a little cocked up and eyebrows raised. I knew what he was thinking, — "A funny man to sit and write when he might be playing with *me* in a real boat."

I put down my book at eleven o'clock.

"I love flowers in the house, John," said Joan.

"I know you do," I said.

"I slept so well last night."

"So did I."

"What are you writing?"

"My new novel for the spring."

"What's it about?"

"Oh, — life and death — and love."

She gave a little sigh and smiled and took my book and got up. "Come to the babies, John," she said. "But wait a minute." With a swift movement she went round the house into the sitting-room and opened a drawer in the table. But before she put the book into it, she held it to her lips for a moment and against her breast. Then she came out

and I took her hand and we scrambled down the bank and over the sands to the boat.

There was no storm at sea that morning.

We sailed across three thousand miles of water to England. John and Marjory had talked of nothing but England for two days, it appeared, and then we took the train, — it was a most elastic and ubiquitous boat, — to the country and flew up the hill in an aeroplane to my house, where the big dog was, and where the cows were grazing in the meadow, flicking their anæmic tails to keep the persistent flies away.

"Do you kill a cow to get the milk?" asked John.

"Yes, of course," said Marjory.

The children went back with Nannie. Joan and I lingered in the sun. A party of crows flopped heavily over our heads. Nobody's dog came and looked at us from a little distance, gave the suspicion of a wag in reply to the flip of my fingers and made off. The sand was warm through my shoes.

"Tell me about your house," said Joan.

"You tell me," I laughed, imitating John, who invariably asked you to give him all the details of the thing about which you had asked him.

She stopped and put a white-shoed foot on a piece of brown rock with her eyes straight ahead as though looking at a picture that she knew by heart. Her wide-brimmed Panama hat shaded

all her face except her chin on which there was a splash of sun. The collar of her silk shirt was cut low and there were freckles round her ears. Her lines were so slight and sweet that she might have been a sister to those babies.

"It has a thickly thatched roof," she said, "that hangs over the windows like bushy eyebrows. The chimneys are stubby and fat and when the smoke comes out on a windless day it looks like cotton wool. The walls are all sorts of colours, — bits of worn red and touches of yellow and green, mossy green, and almost white where the rain has soaked it. The door is narrow and warm with an old oak beam above it and all the windows have small panes of leaded glass. The paths are bricked

and uneven and there are roses everywhere and hollyhocks with round shoulders, like tall boys who have outgrown their strength. And all round it, but not too near, there are trees with many arms all loaded with leaves and between the gaps great stretches of country lie below in patterns. . . . Is that right?"

"Yes; how did you know?"

"I've always known, John," she answered.

She turned round and faced me on the step of the verandah. Her wide-apart blue eyes were filled with tears. "I've often looked in at the window behind which the light burns very late every night and seen you bending over a desk with your shiny head in your

hand. . . . You've been very lonely, haven't you, John?"

"Hideously lonely, Joan," I said.

"And so have I — indescribably — terribly."

I held out my hand and she took it and put it against her breast.

Two days before the hotel closed I had been working steadily on Joan's verandah all the afternoon. A torrent of rain had fallen the night before and had made the few remaining flowers in the gardens of the shut-up bungalows all round my hotel look very sagged. The chalky roads were soft and sticky and heavy clouds skidded across a kindly disposed sun.

I had been playing train with the

babies and making myself into a tunnel by the simple process of standing with my legs far apart, — they crawled through making sounds like "Iland-ilang" in imitation of an engine's bell, — and left to go back to dinner when the light had almost gone. I saw a man drive up in a small motor wagon which delivered groceries. I don't know why I stopped. Instinct, I suppose, or perhaps a feeling that it was my right and privilege to stand by that cottage in which there were only women and children. At any rate I went back within ear-shot of the kitchen door and heard that man say angrily that if his bill wasn't paid by the next day he wouldn't deliver anything else. "It's two months in arrears," he said, "and I

can't afford to let it run. Besides, I've been stung before by visitors and I'm taking no chances."

I didn't hear what Rose said but I followed the man to his machine. "Have you got your bill with you?" I asked.

"No, but I can give you the amount."

I wrote it down with his name and address. "All right. I'll look in to-night and write you a cheque."

"Are you Mrs. Thompson's brother?" His tone was polite.

"My cheque's good," I said.

It was the first time I had heard Joan's name.

"Thank you," he said, cranked up and drove off.

I had dinner as quickly as I could,

took a trolley car into the town and having paid his bill and obtained a receipt, went into a big store where meat and vegetables were sold and asked for Mrs. Thompson's account. I had struck the right place, which wasn't extraordinary because it was the only large shop of the kind, and paid there too, pocketing the receipt. I then found a fish shop and a chemist's. The name of Thompson was unknown to them both. I searched further. There were several fish shops and many chemists, but before I left the town I had found the right ones and paid them to date. In each case my cheque on a well-known New York bank was accepted without question. The men may have looked curiously at me. I didn't notice. What

did it matter to me what Joan's surname was? She was mine.

When I reached the cottage it was an hour and a half later than I had ever been there before in the evening. Joan was walking about on the uneven path alongside the house, anxiously, muffled in an overcoat. It was damp though not cold; cheerless and there were no stars. She ran towards me when she heard my step and whistle.

"Where have you been all this time?" she cried. "Oh, never do this again, John. I can't stand it. I've never been so . . . so nervous and frightened before. I thought something must have happened to you."

My God, how good that was to hear!

"I'm awfully sorry," I said. I could

hear my heart thumping. "I had to go down to the town."

"The town?"

"Yes." I put the receipts into her pocket.

She led the way into the cottage. The elementary electric lights were turned off. Four candles were burning on the wide mantel-board. The farther end of the room was in shadow. My manuscript book with the pencil between its pages had been placed on a small table between two rocking chairs. In one of them her work was lying, as though it had been thrown there. A tangle of blue silk thread lay on the floor. The sound of voices came from the kitchen and an occasional cackle of women's laughter.

This place was home.

"May I read you my last chapter?"

"I want you to," she said and slipped off her coat. I took it and was going to hang it up on the pegs when she put out her hand and drew the receipts out of the pocket. "What are . . ."

When I came into the light again she looked at me and the most beautiful smile was on her face.

"John," she said. "John!"

She came forward and into my arms and kissed my lips. I clutched her tight and kissed her mouth and forehead and eyes, feeling the thump of her heart, the warmth of her limbs. The scent of her hair went to my brain. Every bird on the earth seemed to break into song and the room to be flooded

with a blinding light. My blood burned and I trembled with a sudden wave of vitality, a great passionate thrill of love and desire.

And presently I stood back, having poured out incoherent, inarticulate words. Her eyes were alight and both hands were on her breasts. There was something amazingly ethereal and mediæval about her at that moment, and spiritual.

"You used to kiss me like that and say those things to me when we were together before, John," she said.

"When?" I asked, half bewildered, half understanding.

"Have you forgotten? You can't have forgotten."

"No. Yes. Tell me."

"On the galley," she said, "after you took me from my father and sailed away and put me on the skins above the rowers. Don't you remember the noise the great sail made and the wash of the water as we cut through it? What a Viking you were, my big man."

I said: "We're awake, Joany. Let's face things up."

"Yes," she said, and sat down, resting a hand on my book.

I sat, too, and put my hand possessingly on hers. She was mine. She belonged to me.

"Fisher rented this cottage from some friends of his for the summer. Before we left New York. . . ."

"Fisher is Thompson?"

"Yes. The day before the babies

and I left, — I don't know how it began or whose fault it was, — we said things to each other, suddenly, that brought down everything like a pack of cards, — things that had been on the tip of my tongue to say, oh, an uncountable numbers of times during the last four years. A week after we had settled here he died." ("He's dead: He's dead!" The words went running through my brain.) "I was married at eighteen — a child — and he was the wrong man, as you know. I found it out at once. He wasn't a criminal, or bad in any way. He was conceited and pig-headed and weak, but meant well and worked hard. He was clever, too, and was making a name. He loved me as well as he knew how to love anyone

besides himself and he admired me and leaned on me, because I can make up my mind. He relied on my judgment almost wholly and looked to me like a child to put him right, although playing and posing as the strong, infallible man. He nearly always posed. It went with his peculiar form of weakness, which was really moral cowardice. There was never any happiness or content in the house, only a sort of tacit agreement to disagree on all fundamental things. We kept up appearances for the sake of the babies and our families. He clung to me because I was helpful. Marriage? If that's marriage, then the sooner the law and the church are forced to prevent such a thing, the better for humanity. We muddled along, wasting

the best of life. His egotism and a sort of gift for reconstructing facts to make them look as he desired they should enabled him to get through somehow. Since I've been here I've learned from his solicitors that he left no money. I had with me just enough to pay the first bills. Now I have nothing, but I haven't been anxious because somehow I knew that you were on your way to me. I don't know how I knew, — I just did."

I watched a moth fly madly round and round the flame of one of the candles. Finally it was caught and fell with a little thud. I was amazed to find that I was not attacked by an overwhelming passion of jealousy and rage — that the incident of this man

seemed untrue and unmeaning and nebulous. More than ever the babies seemed to be mine because they were hers and she belonged to me. I put the palm of her hand to my lips.

She went on thoughtfully. "I don't quite know why I married him. Does a girl of eighteen ever quite know why she marries? I had known him for two or three years. He was kind and clean and straight. I had no father or brothers to talk to and no sister to consult. My mother was absorbed in her own interests and was strangely detached, the last person in the world I could confide in. . . . I know that I had a tremendous yearning for children. Always since I can remember children have drawn me. I have spoken to

them and put their little hands against my face and held them to me in their helplessness and need, — in the street, in trains, in hotels, wherever I saw them. I know that I wanted to possess one of my own, — unbearably sometimes. I think that's why I married, — not realizing that it meant so much more. . . . Eighteen! I was only a child. And no one told me. . . . But now *you've* come. My waiting is over at last."

She put her cheek down on my hand and gave a long sigh.

And for a time we sat like that, in silence.

Not at once, but in a few months from that night we should be married. . . . I was obsessed with a great joy, a blessed sense of harbourage, the splen-

did knowledge that I had found my woman, my responsibility, the cord that tied me to life and lifted it from a weary, meaningless tramp into something fine and big and purposeful.

Like children we were too happy and contented to fret at having to conform to convention. About death there is a deep solemnity. We had met and loved and the earth was ours.

I left early so that Joan should have all the sleep that she needed.

I didn't go straight to the hotel. I walked and walked, listening to the sea, hearing the song of the stars, watching the shimmer of the moon on the water. The sky was no longer overcast. The blanket of clouds had been drawn back

and piled up in a great mountainous heap, like dirty snow, and there was a clear delicious sky, all fresh and clean.

It seemed to me wonderfully easy to believe in the existence of God that night, and in the certainty and necessity of a future life. This was not entirely because I was profoundly, startlingly happy — happiness is responsible for all good thoughts. The beauty and wonder of the scene all round and over me filled me with reverence and optimism. It was not an accident. It was not haphazard any more than is the creation of life — itself the greatest of His miracles.

I stood and looked and listened, and out of the earth and sea and sky I could feel the need equal to my own, as urgent

and pressing as my own, for a mate and for children. Nature has no use for lonely detached things. Every bird and beast and plant has a mission to perform — a duty to carry out. The very stars weld and have small stars. Without God there could have been no humanity. If humanity ceased what would become of the usefulness of God?

I had found Joan . . . and out there, in God's roofless cathedral, with the organ of the sea giving praise and His nightly choir joining voices to His everlasting glory, I thanked Him for Joan and her little ones.

I hadn't told her, — I forgot; but I intended when I left the hotel within a few hours to take my things to her cottage and stay there. There was no

need for me to mention it. I knew that she desired it, — considered it to be right. In future she must be responsible to me and I to her. Her loneliness and waste of life were over, as mine were. I — and I knew that she — didn't intend to be influenced by what people might say. The tongue of scandal is in the mouth of Ananias. We had everything to gain and nothing to lose. But my room should not be hers, — at least, not yet, — and in that I knew instinctively that she would agree. Not because we were ashamed or afraid. Only so that the fulfilment of love should be blessed.

VI

I DROVE up with my baggage about four o'clock the next afternoon. The racketty hired motor-car carried almost more than it could stand, and the man had driven squeezed into a small space by a large trunk, covered with labels. It amused me to see him steering with one hand and holding a kit bag with the other, while he chewed gum industriously, — a great broad-shouldered fellow with a neck like a bull's. Every moment I had expected to find myself sitting among a débris of wheels and old iron in the undergrowth that lined

the unbelievable road. He hauled the car to a standstill with a rasping of brakes that awoke echoes, and carried in my things as though they were small sacks of coal. The cowlike action of his jaw never ceased.

I had spent the morning with Joan on the verandah and my room was ready. John ran out to meet me, followed by Marjory. "You live in my house now?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes," I said. "Are you glad?"

His reply was more than eloquent. He flung his arms round me and when he let go marched about, making much noise with his feet, saying "Ah-ha! Ah-ha!" excitedly.

"Is Marjory glad, too?" asked Joan. "Yes, mudder?"

"Yes, mudder."

"And has she got a nice kiss for John? Yes, mudder?"

"Yes, mudder," and with outstretched arms she came up, holding up her face.

Darling kids!

And all the while Nannie stood by with amazement in her eyes, but with the spirit of romance burning in them, too.

My room faced the sea and had two windows. Between them was a round table on which Joan had put a bowl of flowers. The walls were unpapered. The wood was varnished and nicely grained and the floor was partially covered by a plain rug. It was very fresh and cheery and filled with salt air.

The children, intensely interested, watched me unpack, commenting on my socks and ties and hats and shoes.

"When I be as big as John I have all these shoes, mudder?" asked John.

"If you've worked as hard, old son," said Joan, who sat in a low chair, with a wonderful smile on her lips.

Marjory made for a large round tin of tobacco, a collar box and a bottle of hair stuff. "When these be's empty I have them," she stated.

"Don't touch anything, darling," said Joan.

"All right," and she took up a leather case and spilt my waistcoat buttons, links and collar studs all over the floor.

"Marjory won't go to England," announced John the second with the superb

finality of a county court judge. England had become the Mecca of their dreams.

He liked my clothes and as I hung them up on the hooks felt each coat critically. One would have supposed that the lad had never been in a man's room before, so absorbed was his interest. I put him into a golf coat which came down to his heels and he strutted about giving an admirable imitation of my walk. There was no peace until Marjory was dressed up, too, and they both played at being men, carrying a pipe apiece; so my shirts were put away while they were occupied.

It was all like a dream come true to me, especially when Joan suddenly got up and came over and put her golden

Three soldiers in the sitting room before dinner marched grimly round and round. *Page* 95.

soft head on my chest and said, "John, John!"

There were three soldiers in the sitting-room before dinner who marched grimly round and round armed with the latest rifles, — a putter, a mashie and a driving iron, very rusty, — while "Alexander's Rag-time Band" played in the barrack square, in the shape of Joan, who sat on the table working the gramophone, with one white shoe crossed over the other and one hand beating time. All went well until Marjory broke away and slipped in front of John. Outraged at such a breach of military etiquette, he gave her a mighty heave, down she went with a crash, a loud howl uprose, off went Joan from the

table, the army fell into hopeless disruption and the pin slipped off the grooves of the record and hissed like an angry swan.

As soon as Marjory was appeased and her knees kissed, Master John was dealt with. The crime of hitting a girl was explained to him — No boy who did that ever grew into a man, — a regular man. It wasn't done by gentlemen. What would he do if a big brute came up and hit mudder?

The boy's hitherto sulky eyes moved quickly at that, with a new glint in them, and he stole his hand into Joan's.

"I don't want to spank you," she went on, following up her advantage, "because that hurts me much more, yes, much more, than it hurts you, because you're my son, and when my

son John is so naughty that he has to be spanked I want to go away and hide, I'm so ashamed. *My* son — spanked? Think of it. . . . What are you going to do?"

The boy's mouth began to tremble a little and his eyes to flicker. "You tell me," he said.

Joan turned to me. He hated that. "What do you think he can do?" she asked without the vestige of a smile.

I frowned heavily and remained in deep thought for a moment, watched closely by both children.

Marjory had the air of a great heroine. She was not enjoying it quite so much now, because there was so much seriousness in the air.

"He must go up to Marjory and say,

'I'm very sorry. I won't do it again. Please forgive me.' Otherwise he'll have to be a postman or a trolley-car conductor, and Marjory and I will be soldiers."

For a moment he wrestled hard with pride. It was a big struggle. But when he saw me pick up the club that he had dropped, he went and stood about five feet away from Marjory and recited the awful words. "I very sorry. I won't do it again."

Joan prompted him.

"Please forgive me," he added. Then he made a rush to a corner and stood with his face to the wall and I knew that his mouth was wide open and his eyes drawn down and big tears running down his cheeks.

I stopped Joan as she was going to make a rush for him and called out, with my best parade rasp, "Army, fall in," and began marking time. So did Marjory. And after a few seconds he turned round, crept back, took his club from a chair and fell in alongside me, and out came the sun, away went "Alexander's Rag-time Band," and Joan went back to her place on the table and the manœuvres continued.

Even a watch spring is not more delicately hung than the mind of a child.

After dinner, at Joan's earnest request, I dictated to her for two hours.

At first, it was difficult to switch my mind away from that charming, alluring figure, sitting at the table, with a pencil

in her well cut hand and the light of the candles thrown back from her golden hair. The gravity of her beautiful girlish face, — the profile silhouetted against the wall that was in shadow, — made me want to laugh. It was so very grave and important. And then the irresistible call of her femininity filled me with a wild desire to go and kneel at her feet and wrap my arms round her and take her lips. I adored her. She awoke all the latent passion, all the starved love, that was in me. . . .

But I controlled myself, and while she read out the last two pages of my last chapter, stood with my face between my hands and my elbows on the mantel-board. Then the wheels of my brain began to move and my characters

to take shape and, walking up and down like an animal in a cage, I spoke a new chapter, hearing what the people to whom my imagination had given birth had to say, describing exactly what I saw them do. During that two hours I might have been a thousand miles from Joan and the babies. I was the mere trained instrument, the articulate reporter, the recorder of what I saw and heard.

I returned to consciousness when the chapter ended and the peep-hole through which I had been peering was closed suddenly, as though by the fall of a curtain.

And then, oh, my God, how warm and tender and relying she was against my heart.

"I love you, I love," she said, "I love you."

"I love you," I said, "I love you," and my heart beat strong and true and all my body was full of health and the joy of life.

Somewhere a clock struck eleven and I let her go.

"Bed?" she said.

I nodded and took the two candles. I waited at the foot of the stairs while she locked the door and then followed her up. Her room was next to mine. She opened her door and I gave her a light. And for a moment we stood looking into each other's eyes, afraid to speak.

Then: "God bless you, John," she said, and gave me her hand.

For a moment we stood looking into each other's eyes, afraid to speak. *Page* 102.

"God bless you, Joany," I answered, and held it for a moment.

Our doors shut together.

But the day had come up over the horizon before I put down the book I was reading and the pipe I had loaded and reloaded, and fell asleep, — to dream.

VII

JOAN and the babies and I seemed to have the earth almost to ourselves during the days that followed.

Another heavy torrent of rain which lasted all one night and part of the next day seemed to bring autumn with it, and leave behind a nagging, disagreeable, cross-grained wind that chilled the air after sundown and tormented the sea into a constant irritation. They were more like October than September days. A log fire in the evening was very cheery and desirable.

But there was spring in my heart and Joan's.

I continued to dictate to her and we mapped out the time into regular hours of work and play. Nine o'clock found us in the sun on the verandah. Up and down I paced until eleven, when we went down to the babies and built castles or hunted for shells or stalked Indians, armed to the teeth with ten-cent revolvers, or scrambled about among the rocks.

After lunch, leaving the two youngsters asleep in the nursery, we went off to the golf course and practised short approaches and putting, eliminating ourselves with a scrupulous attention to the rules of the royal and ancient that the few remaining golfers sometimes

failed to acknowledge with the right courtesy. Being incurably English, I instituted the habit of tea, and we sat on the excellent verandah of the golf house, dodging mosquitoes, and ate the marmalade sandwiches that accompanied it. Then we went back laughing and talking, hand in hand, found the children and kept them interested and amused till Nannie called them to supper. After dinner worked again.

Nothing broke the placid normality of all those good hours — nothing. Not even nature, who, by tacit agreement we recognized and warded off. Not yet, we both seemed to say to her — the time has not come. Torture us as little as you can, friend, but be near at hand.

What, in all this, is almost unbe-

lievable to me now, seemed then to be perfectly natural and right. It still seems to be natural and right; but the peculiarity, the indescribable frankness and simplicity of it all stands out bigly against the world's background of deceit and hypocrisy and illicit love. There was honesty in what we had done, at any rate, and strength. We met, at last, and knew each other on sight. We were unafraid. Of nothing had we to be ashamed. This was too big and fine a love for us to spoil. It was not a thing of the moment, ephemeral and greedy. It meant something more than self-indulgence. There were other lives, other small human things to consider, to whom to be responsible and to whom to answer.

That was our open and simple attitude. Working and playing, utterly happy and thankful, with heart and soul filled with content and joy and gratitude, we went on, quietly waiting, unworried, unanxious, for the time when we could, without offending the natural susceptibilities either of Thompson's people or of hers, go into Church together.

VIII

THE following four days were golden and unforgetable. Warmth came back into the sun and hardly a fleck of cloud broke the smooth surface of the sky. The sea put on the kittenish, soft, purring airs of a young and coquettish girl and played upon the beach. A dancing haze hung all round the cottage like a screen of multitudinous and almost invisible beads and only after the sun went down in all the pageantry of a royal death was there the tang of autumn in the air.

There are no days more beautiful or

inspiring in all the year than those of a fine September. Their mellowness is like that of a splendid woman who takes a little rest after having sent her children to school and who has time and the mood to remember that her own youth and loveliness have not yet gone. It must be very good for September, as for a good mother, to look back on her achievements; on the great promises of spring fulfilled in the summer; on the new life all out strongly in the world; on the new beginnings that will eventually ripen to a useful maturity. How fine and exquisite a deed is motherhood. The future destiny of the world is the work of the mother. It is given to her as to no one else to reap what she has sown. She is the most power-

ful of all religions, the medium for God's greatest and most perpetual miracle. Science with all its amazement and art in its most inspiring forms cannot compete with the woman who bears children.

In the cottage that was aloof and detached from all but the perpetual traffic of the sea there were four happy children. It is right that I should put Joan and myself under that heading. Love had the gift of making people childlike. It gives simplicity and trust and charity and faith and that intimate understanding of nature as the eye sees it that go with childhood before disillusion and disappointment, grief, disloyalty and ungratefulness make the heart bitter and sceptical, and the eye

introspective. We were childlike also in that we did without the gratification of passion, though this was not easy. We promised each other that we would wait for the child's sake. We kept this promise.

Working and playing, together and with the children, those memorable days passed all too quickly. We were nearly as completely isolated as though becalmed on a deserted sea. There we were, on what seemed to be the edge of the earth, a mile from a summer resort from which all the visitors had gone, two and a half miles from a town that was half-a-day's journey from New York, without mails or newspapers or telephones; tradesmen the only people who came near us; Rose and Nannie

and the babies the only other persons in the house.

If ever fate placed two people in a position of the most searching and even disillusioning test, we surely were the two that were chosen. Together day after day anything might have happened but for the most complete mutual sympathy and a love as faithful and enduring as it was physically passionate and hungry.

If I had been tortured by jealousy, and my brain had been the happy hunting-ground of morbid and hellish thoughts of Thompson as the father of Joan's two babies, I can conceive thinking of them as perpetual reminders of years in which I had no place, and then the first faint shadow of the grim and

ugly figure that seems to take a devilish joy in coming between men and women must have fallen upon the wall of the cottage. It may be difficult to make some people believe that I needed the babies almost as much as Joan did. To me they seemed to complete the picture of her which was framed by my love. They were preciously hers, part of her as much as her long, fair hair, her delicately cut, sensitive hands, and her eyes that set me on fire. That being so, the babies also belonged to me. They came to me with her. I chose to think — I think it still — that they were part of the exquisite responsibility without which love may one day turn a distant corner hand in hand with passion.

The jealousy that sometimes clutched

me by the throat and struggled for mastery was not of Thompson — that insubstantial creature who seemed to have wandered into life from a box of marionettes — but of the good and fruitful years that Joan and I might have spent together, in the first glory of our youth.

In the hours that were not devoted to work we talked of this as we scoured the country, now in its red and golden clothing. It was a definite agreement between us that we were to hide nothing from each other; to be scrupulously honest in everything; never to let any question that crept into the mind stay in it to rankle and spread, cancerously, and to deal truthfully by each other always, under all circumstances. We

decided also never to argue, or indulge in sarcasm even by way of joke, and, above all, to turn and run top-speed from anything that might lead to a quarrel. No day is long enough for love. In what part of it, then, is there time for quarreling? Just as the drawing of a brutal finger across the delicate wing of a butterfly leaves an indelible mark, the first quarrel bruises the irrecoverable bloom of love. There were many small points on which, of no account, we had already agreed to differ. But if there were two opinions on vital matters, as, for instance, the schooling of the children, or any other of the hundred and one questions that must come up in our life together, mine was to be the final say. This, not because

my judgment was regarded as infallible, or because I happened to be some years older than Joan and therefore might be supposed to have acquired additional wisdom, or, at any rate, more knowledge of life and how it should be managed, but for the simple, excellent reason that I was the male — the master. We heard, mentally, the angry and derisive laughter of advanced women when this point was arrived at, and I gave Joan an imitation of one of them hurling such epithets at my head as "old-fashioned", "out-of-date", and the rest of them. The fact remained however that being male I intended to follow the law of nature and be the dominating factor — a law which if adopted by American husbands would

save many thoughtless women, overburdened with freedom, from making epic fools of themselves.

We both felt, I think, during those beautiful, curious, detached days, as though Time had come to a dead stop — as though the very earth had halted in its incessant movement — and we seized upon this wonderful and solemn pause to take stock of ourselves and then draw up a deed of partnership to which to subscribe our names. Neither of us failed to recognize the deadly seriousness of our compact, and neither of us had any fear as to its success.

We were returning from the golf course one evening — the now deserted golf course — where the club-house was

closed and the sturdy, middle-aged man who sat on a cutting-machine and drove a patient, big-footed horse up and down and then across, leaving long, velvety lines behind, were our only companions. The light had gone out with that peculiar swiftness which is so surprising to Europeans. We turned round suddenly to find night standing at our elbows. With one arm round Joan's delicious shoulders and one hand holding the strap of my bag of clubs — their faces all damp and stained with wet grass — we left the great deserted hotel behind and went along the short road which led to the sands. On each side the houses were shut up and the few remaining flowers in the small gardens had already become unkempt and un-

tidy, like children running wild. The first star came out and looked like a little hole pricked in the sky. The wind that came over the sea was keen and sharp.

Half-way across the sands the amazing sense of being alone on earth with Joan that was given to me by the solitariness of the place and the oncoming darkness, swept over me. I became suddenly a primeval man alone with his mate — his woman. Passion, the gorgeous knowledge of possession, an irresistible desire to hold and touch, to feel the answer of her lips, the response of her body, carried me away. I flung my clubs down, seized Joan in my arms and kissed her. She suddenly startled me with a sort of yearning,

maternal cry, as her arms tightened about my neck.

"Oh, John, John! My man, my master!" she cried. "Make me the mother of your son! I want him! I need him! I want to do something for you, to reproduce you, to have the pride and joy of bearing fruit by you, to see you small and helpless and dependent, to feed you, — the little new you, — to have a little baby hand clasp my finger and a little hungry mouth fumble for my breast!"

I don't know what I said. What could I say? What was there to say except that love such as ours, good and great and true and faithful as it was, must wait for the recognition of the Church.

"It can't be," I said. "I want you to give a child to me. I want to see you fulfilling the law of nature by me, but we must wait."

"How long?" she asked, all warm and soft and alluring in my arms.

"A little while longer — only a little while longer."

She still clung to me in all the beauty of her youth — in all the urgency of her womanhood — silently demanding her rights — setting my brain and blood in a hot turmoil of desire. I put my lips to her ear and begged her not to tempt, not to weaken my strength, but to help and make less selfish.

And then she kissed me and her arms relaxed and we went home.

It was all too difficult, as of course any average man or woman could have told us had we asked for advice.

The time came when to live in that exposed bungalow — now almost always wet with the sea's spray and wholly cut off from the town because the trolley-cars had ceased to run — was impossible. The last vestige of summer had disappeared and winter was dogging the heels of autumn. It was not good to keep the babies in this place any longer. Joan had nowhere to take them, and no money.

One windy morning Joan and I marched into the town. Having already broken the conventions we decided to mend them by obtaining a license to be married, and we presented ourselves before the proper official, gave him all

the necessary details, obtained the document, and duly armed with this called on the rector of an Episcopal Church, a kindly old man, who smiled benignly upon us and finding that we had no witness, asked his housekeeper to follow us into the Church. Quite accustomed to being called upon to perform this duty the old lady, in whose heart romance still dwelt, took her place and the simple ceremony was performed to the accompaniment of the song of the wind. The beautiful service was read with quiet dignity and impressiveness by the rector, and when the little ring which I had bought in the town was slipped by me on Joan's finger, the look that came into her eyes brought out of my heart a prayer that I might be

worthy of her and a good father to those two little children whose future happiness and well-being were at my mercy.

And then, having made inquiries about trains to Boston, where we intended to spend the winter, we retraced our steps to the bungalow. With a song on her lips, Joan went off to find the babies and bring them back to lunch, and I sat down to begin a new chapter.

Presently Joan found me at work, sat on the edge of my chair and put her arms round my neck, and I whispered something in her ear that brought into her face the look of a Madonna.

Metaphorically I raised my hand to the figure of fate which had stood waiting on the threshold, and said: "Pass, friend! All's well!"

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